



The Effective Organization

September 2008

Things Go Boom

“The French stayed behind the Imaginary Line, where they were perfectly safe until the Germans decided to cross it.”

-- Richard Armour

Consider some incidents that happened in the recent past to businesses:

- A building fire forces the evacuation of your building and surrounding buildings.
- A fire destroys your corporate headquarters and the survival of the company is in jeopardy.
- A sudden, intense thunderstorm takes knocks out power.
- A snowstorm closes roads and makes travel dangerous.
- The CEO has a fatal heart attack.
- A disgruntled employee brings a gun to work and starts shooting.

Some companies tell me these issues are simply not worth worrying about: they are either sufficiently routine, such as a thunderstorm, or sufficiently highly unlikely, such as the CEO

having a fatal heart attack, that they simply do not believe it is a worthwhile investment to prepare for them.

Other businesses tell me it's not a problem, because they have a disaster plan. Like the Maginot Line, most disaster plans are extremely effective so long as they are never actually needed. They serve primarily as a way of making people feel safe. Now, this may be all you really want; at least it's a step up from the companies that have chosen to do nothing.

If, however, you actually want your disaster plan to be effective, that requires a bit more of an investment. Properly done, that investment will pay some unexpected dividends.

First and foremost, make sure that your disaster plan is communicated to your employees well before a disaster strikes. This may seem obvious, but far too many disaster plans are shelved and not pulled out until the crisis or emergency strikes. At that point, it is too late.

How the disaster plan is communicated says a great deal. Employees will take seriously what management takes seriously.

Upcoming Events

Gifted Kids and Group Work at NECGT, 18 October 2008.

For more information, please visit www.7stepsahead.com.

Publications

The Success Mind in the Worcester Business Journal

Seven Habits of Pointy Haired Bosses in ByThePeople.org

Great Follies in American Business -- The "Great-Uncle" Technique in ByThePeople.org.

If management treats it as a minor, or major, annoyance, don't expect the employees to pay a great deal of attention. If management demonstrates through their actions that the plan is important, then the employees will treat it accordingly. Involving employees in the creation and debugging of the plan is a very effective way to get them to take it seriously. People care more about with something they were part of creating than something foisted on them. You are also more likely to create a better plan when you consult with the people who

actually have to carry it out. By making your employees feel more involved, you'll also increase overall motivation.

How the business approaches rehearsing its disaster plan says a lot about how seriously it takes that plan. If you practice at four o'clock on a Friday, then it is clearly an afterthought and no one will care. If practice requires people to work extra hours or give up weekends, it is an imposition, and people will resent and resist it. Practice has to be part of the work day, as important as any staff meeting or other activity. Done right, it can be a fun way to break up the day and add a little variety.

Best-selling novelist Terry Pratchett once wrote that the problem with emergency preparedness drills is that they leave out the emergency. Once people understand the plan and can execute it under conditions of no stress, you need to add stressors. Why? As is well known in martial arts and competitive sports, people will often do just fine in a relaxed practice environment, and then be overwhelmed by the rush of adrenaline that comes with a real world situation. Practicing under stress will improve performance

under greater stress. That doesn't mean you set the building on fire or give the CEO a heart attack, but it does mean creating conditions that will invoke a realistic feeling of pressure. Learning to deal with pressure will also pay for itself when a major deadline approaches.

Finally, you need to honestly assess the quality of your team. Stronger teams will be better able to handle a crisis situation than weaker teams. A team which is dependent upon a manager for direction and guidance is going to be less able to respond in an emergency than one that is more self-reliant. Teams where members claim they never disagree are less likely to respond well than teams where members have learned how to disagree productively. This difference in responsiveness will also manifest in more "routine" disasters such as unexpected software bugs, product defects, or problems with a customer.

Your disaster plan can be an afterthought or something that strengthens your company. If you approach it properly, preparing a good disaster plan will pay dividends in every other aspect of your business.

About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is the president of 7 Steps Ahead, a consulting firm specializing in increasing individual, team, and organizational performance.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology at Wentworth Institute of Technology and has guest lectured at MIT and WPI.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.

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